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9 October 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

SUBJECT : The Austin Papers

1. The exploratory trip to Austin accomplished both what I hoped and what I feared it would. It cleared up a number of questions, but at the same time raised as many new ones and made clear--too clear--the full dimensions of the task President Johnson and his staff have in mind.

2. This is not to say that they themselves are clear on their course of action or that they fully appreciate the scope of the problem. They know what they want (or perhaps intend) to do about releasing President Johnson's papers, but beyond that they are extremely uncertain.

3. The overriding impression you come away with is that the former president and his aides have not really come to grips with the essential problems posed. They have not thought through all the implications and possible consequences. While they have given enough thought to the matter over the past few months to be aware of the major problems, they are not at all sure how far they can or should go in carrying out President Johnson's unprecedented proposal to open as many of his files as possible to interested scholars.

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4. Mr. Johnson has in mind two distinct uses for the material in his files, and the over-all task can be broken down into two separate projects. First, he intends to draw on whatever files he (or his staff) may need in producing material for publication under his name. So far he is committed to produce one book of "highlights" of his administration, due to the publisher by the middle of November, at least two volumes of "memoirs," and an extended series of CBS television interviews (the first two of which have been taped).

5. Second, President Johnson would like to make selected documents in his files, all of which will be housed in the Johnson Library at the University of Texas, available to researchers on a non-classified basis. As you know, he wants very much to do this now, while he is alive and well, rather than at some predetermined time in the distant future.

6. In terms of the Agency's responsibility to consult and assist in these matters, the first project offers no great problem. Since the Johnson files belong to the former president and he can and will use them as he sees fit, we have little control over the materials used in this phase. In addition, there is no real need, in my judgment, nor is there enough time available before the first deadlines, to review the full range of papers on which his staff is drawing. Everyone in Austin does want to be sure, however, that nothing will be published which is harmful to the national security or damaging to the individuals who were involved. They are especially concerned in this regard when it comes to drawing on such sensitive files as the Tuesday Luncheon series.

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7. The only sensible way to meet this requirement concerning President Johnson's own output is the method normally used, i.e., to review the drafts after the material is selected and incorporated into the narrative. Nearly all the chapters on foreign problems in the forthcoming book of "highlights" have been drafted and, at least in some cases, vetted by Messrs. Rusk and McNamara. The redrafting process is now under way, with the staff under heavy pressure from the publisher (and presumably President Johnson), to meet the 15 November deadline.

8. The second objective, that of releasing raw documents to researchers expected to beat a path to the Johnson Library, poses far greater problems and an enormous task. As you know, President Johnson discussed the question with President Nixon in San Clemente, and the latter agreed that a substantial quantity of classified documents probably could and should be released on grounds that there was no longer any real need to keep them classified. This would not apply to all documents, of course. President Nixon apparently gave his blessing to the effort.

9. The draft plan of procedure worked up by the Johnson archivist, which I gather Tom Johnson showed you when he was here, is based on this general agreement in principle. Any agreement, either in the White House or in Austin, does not go much beyond the principle, however. No firm judgments have been made regarding some of the major effects which would have to be considered in opening almost any presidential files to public scrutiny. These of course include security questions, reaction of foreign governments and personalities concerned, impact on current relations in cases where previous actions remain highly relevant, inhibition of current and future political reporting to the government, morale of our foreign services, and effect on the careers and reputations of persons still active in government, etc.

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10. It is difficult to conceive how any actual declassification program can get under way before these large, fundamental questions are weighed and judged more deliberately. This should be done by individuals who have the authority and experience to speak for the services and agencies they lead.

11. Only when agreement has been reached at this level of authority should the screening begin, in my view. When it does, it will be a time-consuming process. I came to the conclusion (as has Bill Jordan) that the archivist's estimate of 12 to 18 months' work for a team of several officers from the principal agencies is not far off the mark, and may even be optimistic. In some sixty safes there are about 435 cartons packed with files, all of which would have to be at least reviewed. Some could be excluded out of hand, but the great bulk would have to be scrutinized with great care before being officially declassified. Even if it were possible for a team to get through a box a day (one a week would be a more realistic guess), it would take more than a year and a half on a normal work schedule.

12. With regard to super-sensitive files (almost everything sent or received by the White House is sensitive), it is more or less agreed that it would not be feasible to allow scholars access to reports on the Tuesday lunches and NSC meetings, among others, in their present form. Material might be extracted from them at some later date. A survey of the subject index leads me to conclude that quite a few other files, including most of the ones directly involving the Agency, also should fall into this category.

13. The task, as you can see, divides into two segments, one a matter of weeks and the other a matter of years. It is also clear that what is needed and wanted in Austin at this stage is advice and counsel on whether and how to proceed. (Tom Johnson acknowledged that after weighing all the factors involved, President Johnson and the staff might come to a decision not to proceed with early release at all and to go the route of the Truman and Eisenhower libraries.)

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14. I recommend that we do what we can to help them through the current pre-publication phase, provide whatever professional advice we can, but hold off on the larger declassification project pending submission of the unresolved questions to some higher court.

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